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## Issues in Vendor/Library Relations-Will Amazon Wal-Mart the Book Vendors?

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Darwinian rules under which we instead play, happily, free librarians from day upon nightmarish day filled up with closing the door, walking away, hanging up the phone, wearing out the delete key. A good thing too for vendors, who keep a reasonable chance of gaining an audience, and need suffer only a normal quota of rebuffs.

Whenever librarian and vendor face one another across a desk, the interplay between permanence and likely impermanence somehow informs the exchange. On a personal level, the vendor may wonder how it would feel to have the security or the accoutrements enveloping the librarian, who may at that moment be playing with thoughts about the freedom from routine vendors seem to enjoy. On a business level, the librarian must always raise the question, how stable is this vendor? The question may be kept silent or may be put to the vendor, but it is always there, at the bottom of any decision to give business, or to withhold or withdraw it. Will the library's business make the vendor stronger (always at the expense of another), and so a better partner to help the library toward its own ends? If the answer isn't clear, how much risk should a library take on, toward the somewhat abstract goal of a healthier marketplace? Is there a stronger vendor out there anyway? If a library is already invested heavily with a particular vendor, is there any benefit in hedging the bet, by opening a fledgling business relationship with a second vendor? And how stable is that vendor?

Meanwhile, the vendor is at work trying to gain (or hold) a piece of the stability and permanence the library offers through its business. The business itself will naturally be welcome at headquarters. But a new or larger or older account is also a personal mark for the rep, whose career might advance with a nice portfolio, and might collapse without one. Having an association with a library can be as important as the resulting sales. Some of that aura of permanence may rub off. To be associated in some way with a prestigious institution, especially, is a comforting thing, since others within a company will take note, as will the competitors without.

Small wonder that successful vendor representatives sometimes identify with their best customers as much as they do with their own company. Everyone knows vendor coffee mugs, paperweights, and other small gifts adorn the offices of librarians. It's not such common knowledge that posters and pennants from our leading universities are on display in the hallways and offices of their vendors, whose representatives have bought them and mounted them, lovingly, on the wall. 🐉



## Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Will Amazon Wal-Mart the Book Vendors?

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*Column Editor's Note: It's become a commonplace to say that anyone who displays bibliographic data and/or delivers books within an academic setting—library book vendors, that is, as well as the libraries themselves—should emulate some of the practices of Amazon.com. John Abbott, at the recent Charleston Conference, made an interesting opposite point, that Amazon might want to act like a book vendor. After hearing him, I invited John to take part in this exchange. — BN*

**BN:** John, we book vendors by now are nearly used to being compared to mighty Amazon, and to coming out of the exercise feeling something like brooks or rivulets. We'll concede a lot to Amazon—who can usually deliver a book more quickly than we can, who makes it easy to find books and then tells you a lot about them once found and suggests others too, and who in general is just more fun than we manage to be.

But I'm not so sure about something you said at Charleston, that Amazon might be an approval plan vendor in the future. A book is a book, it's true, and we have that in common with Amazon; library vendors sell books. Beyond that, though, I don't see much resemblance, since the context in which we sell is so entirely different. For Amazon, the book really is the end; today's book, and the one they hope you and millions of others will buy next time online.

For us, it's been years since bookselling has been mainly about selling books. What bookselling has become, for academic library vendors, is figuring out ways to deliver books to libraries in ways that minimize library work in buying them and putting them onto shelves. It's not one-by-one transactions we're asked to focus on, but library workflows organized around mass-buying. So, can we deliver bibliographic and acquisitions information that will load into the library's system? Can we bind, stamp, and label the book just as the library would have? Can we supply instant management information on purchases and returns—a transaction we make nearly as easy as a purchase—in a choice of formats,

and offer to sort the data in different ways? What we'll volunteer to tell Amazon, too, is that these library workflows and specifications all are different. What will work wonderfully for one library will be no use in the next.

That's only the start, since we haven't talked about the bibliographic core of things with approval plans. I wonder how willing Amazon would be to set up an operation to describe and evaluate new books prior to anyone's buying them. Just the physical handling and the necessary systems to make sure you actually get the ones you've told publishers you want—it's about 50,000 titles annually that Amazon would need to account for, somehow keeping this operation separate from their other workflows—is a job in itself. Then, how to describe the books? Would Amazon rely upon the data publishers supply? That was one of the early reasons for the growth of approval plans: the unreliability of what publishers would, or could, tell you about their own books. Who decides if a book is really a textbook, or a reprint, or a dissertation? Who decides what subject(s) a book is about? Finally, before we forget, how does the library's approval plan profile, which has to intersect with all of this description, get written in the first place, and how revised later on?

Granted, we may not be a pretty face. But vendors have worked for years to devise systems to accommodate the particular ways academic libraries buy books, ways that don't have much to do with how an individual might kill an hour on the Web browsing and buying at Amazon. Why would Amazon want to divert any focus to this altogether different group of buyers, a demanding group that would never account for more than a fraction of total sales anyway?

**JA:** Bob, two things. First, whenever anyone is silly enough to ask me to speak, I look at the marginal possibilities and suggest those possibilities that may have real currency, and therefore the "Amazon" thought arose. It may be unlikely, but it is possible and worth considering. Second, your argu-

*continued on page 73*





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## Issues in Vendor/Lib — Amazon from page 72

ment, as always, is a good argument and not easily countered with logical explanations. Fortunately for me, we are talking about the marketplace, and logic is often not a driving factor in any marketplace. Everything you say about current vendors' diligence, hard work, and focus is true, but in the nominal "new economy," the marketplace frequently opts for less substance.

Why would the idea of an **Amazon** ("Amazon" is used here as a placeholder for the large, Web-based book vendors) even emerge as a supplier to libraries? There is currently a perturbation in book vending with the assimilation of **YBP** and **Academic** into larger corporate entities. A perturbation in any system provokes new forces/players to enter, causes increased disorder/entropy, and almost always results in a change of direction of the system. If skin is scratched or a landscape is scarred, invading organisms enter, upset an established system, and provoke a change. If the system has sufficient resources and marshals them properly, the perturbation is short, amelioration takes place, and stability is regained. If not, the system is redefined by the presence of new forces and a new stability may be reached or the system may devolve. In any case, the before and after will be different.

What perturbations are in the offing in this discussion? At **ALA Midwinter 2000**, three book vendors indicated in an **ALCTS** session that they were being consumed by rising automation costs to meet library demands. Per these speakers, the margin on the product is insufficient to cover IT equipment and personnel costs and the costs of customizing services for individual libraries. The clear indication there and in subsequent town hall meetings is that the book vendor-library relationship is up for redefinition, and that this will probably mean increased costs passed on by vendors, to be borne by libraries. It appears the next generation of book vending will have some level of base service without additional fees, and then tiers of service with fees. Even under that model, it may be difficult for book vendors to summon the information processing sophistication an Amazon-like competitor may already be prepared to deliver.

The implication in remarks by former chief officers of **YBP** and **Academic** is that customization of the book vending business, library-by-library, is too costly at the present margins. Will shelf-ready bound, stamped, labeled books continue to be cheaper from a vendor versus in-house in the new marketplace? Maybe not. Will the market sustain library-by-library customization by book vendors? Maybe not. Fifteen to twenty years ago, many libraries set out to create their own

OPACs, because they needed things "their way." Most of those local efforts are long defunct and libraries instead buy off-the-shelf OPACs, which allow limited customization. So too, book vendor customization, library-by-library, may go.

I just reached into my pile of slips and blindly pulled out, **Elliott Sober**, *Philosophy of Biology*, Westview Press, 2000. I went to the **Amazon** site and located the same book. There are some pieces of information—**LCCN**, **LCSH**, and level (honestly, I have never found "level" to be extremely useful, other than to discern children/YA titles)—available on the slip and not found in **Amazon**. The **Amazon** record has a blurb, indications what other buyers of this book also purchased (value? probably zero, unless it was what other universities bought who also bought this book), and an image of the cover. The **Amazon** cost is list + shipping and handling versus the vendor slip cost which is reduced by my university's discount and free shipping. Can a selector make a better decision with the **Amazon** slip and will that be worth the difference in cost? Will publishers like **Westview** offer discounts to the **Amazon**s with sufficient sales volume? If I could look at the **Sober** book data in **Amazon** and see that it was popular in the "user circle" in New Haven, Cambridge, Berkeley, and Lubbock, I couldn't help but think that that in-

*continued on page 74*



formation would influence my decision to purchase the title.

You make a good point that vendors offer many, many services. Librarians have historically wanted deep and detailed information and data. How much of that data is essential? Will the book vendor marketplace look like downtown small-town America, when **Wal-Mart** opens a store at the edge of town? Customers repeatedly abandon personalized service at a higher price for what they perceive as “value,” in convenience, pricing, and selection.

**BN:** You’ve identified, John, where we book vendors have done our poorest work, that is, persuading customers (and potential customers) that the overall package of service we offer is a value. No matter what the relative price for a biology book, sizing up **Amazon** against the vendors, that’s just a part of the picture.

In this case, we notified customers—you and others—about a book of likely interest. Some received paper slips, others electronic announcements, others the book itself. With **Amazon**, you would have had to find it on your own. We’ve developed a number of ways for a libraries to order the book, some of them electronic pathways which link to local ILS systems; we will invoice it with other books, according to local specifications, instead of all by itself on an orphan invoice; we will query customers who mistakenly place a duplicate order; we will accept a return without question; we will offer on-demand reports folding this transaction into overall library activity; and we will have a dedicated customer service representative on hand to look after whatever might go wrong along the way. All of that and, as you point out, we’ll sell you this particular biology book, anyway, for less than **Amazon** will.

And somehow we haven’t been convincing enough that the vendors offer a better value, saving libraries time at half-a-dozen steps along the way. We must really have done a sad job of it in sales and marketing!

Of course you’re right, **Amazon**—or **Wal-Mart** for that matter—may take a look at our market and decide to enter. I wonder what they’ll say the first time a library asks, “Here’s our fund map. Will you please apply it to the books you ship us?” Or, “Here are our cataloging, binding, and processing requirements. Please follow them.” Or calls up to say, “Please tell us why you shipped us this book, and how can we change the profile so that you don’t ship us any more like it?”


I imagine these companies would either say, “no,” the most likely answer; or would calculate their costs fairly exactly before say-

ing “yes,” then pass the costs on to libraries. Either way libraries will pay, perhaps by doing the work themselves, perhaps with cash; and would at some point need to convince administrators that the change was worth the bargain. Or, as you say, maybe libraries will need to abandon some of the particulars of local organizations, and become more like one another.

It’s true, vendors have a lot to learn from **Amazon** when it comes to attractive presentation of useful bibliographic information. But **Amazon** would have a few lessons in store too, and I wonder how willing they would be to learn them.

**JA:** Bob, what I envision is the creation of something like “Amazon-Academe,” not just overtures from the existing **Amazon** to come and buy from them. How might this be accomplished? To start *de novo* would certainly mean the venture would join the huge ash-heap of companies who attempted to enter the library market based on their prior experience selling widgets. The clearest way would be for a large Web-book vendor to buy the expertise they need in the current industry infrastructure. **Amazon** would be wise to buy up one of the remaining smaller book-vending/approval players. That expertise, coupled with **Amazon**’s vast IT power, would allow this entity to converse with libraries in the libraries’ language, bill *en masse* for books, create profiles, etc. Why would a large

Web-based book vendor wish to enter our market? Higher education is here to stay and for the next few decades will still be a growth industry. Scholarly monographs are not likely to go the way anytime soon of SPARC-like or Los Alamos’ Pre-print server initiatives. The higher education market has sophisticated users and a powerful established base of computing power hooked to T-1 lines. The academic community is largely amenable to novelty and change, and if anything, the **Amazons** are about novelty and change. There is plenty of money to be made in our market.

A reasonable question here would be one about vendor stability. Stock prices for **Amazon.com** and **Barnes & Nobles.com** are down dramatically, 80 and 90 percent over the last year. How long can such loss be sustained, or were those stocks dramatically overvalued and are they now finding their real value? Could these companies enter our market and bear the losses until they crush smaller vendors? Would librarians, a few still smarting from the fall of the **Richard Abel Company** and the mixed fortunes of some serials vendors, be willing to move to a speculative new player? The general conservatism of librarians is the ace held by current academic book vendors, to buy time in creating a new model, bringing their virtues to bear on the undeniable attractiveness of the **Amazons**. But the relationship between virtue and beauty is, of course, never as clear as one might like. 



## Oregon Trails

by Thomas Leonhardt (Oregon Institute of Technology)

Publisher catalogs are among my favorite reading. They don’t take a lot of time or concentration but they can be infinitely entertaining and humbling, too. The sheer number of books being published, the minutiae of subjects covered, the years of labor contributed by the authors remind me, once again, of how little I have read, how little I know, how far I have to go. When the Preacher commented on the making of many books, he had no idea just how far away the end was or is. If I have my way, electronic books will have their day in the sun, will find a small niche somewhere in the shade, and traditional publishers will continue to allow writers of all kinds to have a voice and an audience and a future. Then, when my turn comes to say good-bye and leave my books to my children, I will not have had to deal with the ultimate defilement that seems less intent on serving humankind than with squeezing out unprofitable access to the written word (used book stores) in the name of capitalism. Let the writers be heard, let their books be free for lending, re-selling, providing pleasant, reassuring, and handsome fur-

nishings for homes and offices.

The most eloquent statement I have read about books as furniture and as part of one’s life appeared in the June 18, 2000 Sunday *New York Times* (p. 15 Op Ed Week in Review). The title of the piece is “Books Unbound, Life Unraveled,” and the author is **John Updike**, probably the most suitable of all American authors to speak out on behalf of the book. Actually, Updike has several subheadings for his essay: “*The book as furniture*. Shelves rows of books warm and brighten the starkest room, and scattered single volumes reveal mental processes in progress, books in the act of consumption, abandoned but readily resumable, tomorrow or next year...”

“*The book as sensual pleasure*. Smaller than a breadbox, bigger than a TV remote, the average book fits into the human hand with a seductive nestling, a kiss of texture, whether of cover cloth, glazed jacket or flexible paperback...”

“*The book as souvenir*. One’s collection comes to symbolize the contents of one’s mind...”

*continued on page 75*